

FEDERAL WILDLIFE CLOSURE REVIEW WCR12-25

Closure Location: Unit 26C—Muskox

Current Federal Regulation

Unit 26C – Muskox

1 bull by Federal registration permit only. The number of permits that may be issued only to the residents of the village of Kaktovik will not exceed three percent (3%) of the number of musk oxen counted in Unit 26C during a pre-calving census. Public lands are closed to the taking of musk ox, except by rural Alaska residents of the village of Kaktovik hunting under these regulations.

July 15 – Mar. 31

Closure Dates: Year-round

Current State Regulation

Unit 26C

No open season

Regulatory Year Initiated: 1992

Regulatory History

From 1982-1983 until 1990-1991, the State of Alaska managed the muskox hunt in Unit 26C, increasing the number of permits from 5 to 10 bulls by 1988-1989. In 1991-1992, the Federal Government assumed management of muskoxen in Unit 26C (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge). In 1992 the Federal Subsistence Board (Board) adopted Proposal 92 with modification, which closed Federal subsistence hunting of muskoxen in those portions of Unit 26B in the Arctic Refuge, restricted the number of permits issued to 10 bulls for Unit 26C, and closed Federal public lands to the harvest of muskoxen except by rural residents of the village of Kaktovik. Harvest in Unit 26B was eliminated from the Federal subsistence hunt since very few muskoxen occupied Federal lands in the unit at that time. Three other proposals in 1992 dealt with muskox in Units 26B and 26C. They were all rejected by the Board. The concerns expressed in these other proposals were addressed in the Board's action on Proposal 92.

The Board increased the number of permits to 15 bulls in 1996-1997, and permitted the harvest of cows in Regulatory Year (RY) 1998-1999 (2 cows, 13 bulls) to RY 2001-2002 (3 cows, 12 bulls) (**Table 1**). Over time, the Board increased the season in Unit 26C from two months (October and March) to 8.5 months July 15 to March 31.

Special Action WSA02-10 requested to reduce the harvest to 2 bulls for the Sept. 15, 2002 – Mar. 31, 2003 season primarily because of the low population. This special action was approved by the Board.

Proposal WP03-53 established a bull only harvest by Federal registration permit, with the number of permits based on three percent of the number of muskoxen counted during spring pre-calving muskox surveys in Unit 26C. The proposal was adopted by the Board.

Closure last reviewed: 2008 – WCR08-25

Justification for Original Closure (ANILCA Section 815 (3) criteria):

The muskox population was below management objectives and additional harvest would be incompatible with the conservation of a healthy population in Unit 26C. This is consistent with Section 815(3) of ANILCA, which states:

“Nothing in this title shall be construed as- (3) authorizing a restriction on the taking of fish and wildlife for nonsubsistence uses on public lands (other than national parks and monuments) unless necessary for the conservation of healthy populations of fish and wildlife, for the reasons set forth in section 816, to continue subsistence uses of such populations, or pursuant to other applicable law....”

Council Recommendation for Original Closure:

The North Slope Subsistence Regional Advisory Council (Council) supported Proposal 92 as modified by the Board.

State Recommendation for Original Closure:

The State had no recommendation on the original closure. The proposed community harvest limit of 10 bulls provided harvest opportunities in excess of the State’s customary and traditional use findings. State biologists recognized this as an allocation, not a biological issue, since the difference between the harvest of seven and ten animals would not significantly impact the health of the population. However, the State had no position on the closure to muskox hunting in Unit 26C as stated in modified Proposal 92 (FSB 1992).

Biological Background

Muskoxen were reintroduced to the Arctic Refuge coastal plain in 1969 and 1970, and the population grew rapidly, expanding its range east into Yukon, Canada and west into Unit 26B after 1986. Numbers of muskoxen in Unit 26C remained relatively stable (average = 331) between 1987 and 1998, but declined sharply during the early 2000s (**Figure 1**). On the Arctic Refuge in Unit 26C, about 30 were seen in 2003 and 2004, 9 in 2005, 1 in 2006 and 5 in 2007 (Figure 1) (Reynolds 2011). In April 2008, 44 muskoxen were counted in the precalving census . Most of these animals came from Canada the previous summer, but returned to the Yukon in late October (Reynolds 2008).

West of the Arctic Refuge, in Unit 26B, numbers of muskoxen increased between 1987 and 1995, were relatively stable (average = 271), but declined by >100 animals between 2002 and 2003 (Lenart 2007, Reynolds 2011). Censuses of muskoxen in 2006 and 2011 over the total range of the population from west of the Colville in northern Alaska to the Babbage River in northern Yukon showed that the muskox population is currently about 300, with about 200 muskoxen in Unit 26B, west of the Arctic Refuge, and 100 muskoxen in Yukon, Canada east of the Arctic Refuge (Reynolds 2011). Few of these 300 animals currently occupy Unit 26C, Arctic Refuge.

The State of Alaska closed muskox hunts in Unit 26B west of the Arctic Refuge in 2005–2006 (Lenart 2011). Management objectives revised in 2006 were to maintain a stable population of greater than or equal to 200 muskoxen in Unit 26B and eastern 26A, west of the Arctic Refuge (Lenart 2011). More recent management objectives for eastern Unit 26A, Unit 26B, and Unit 26C are to increase the number of

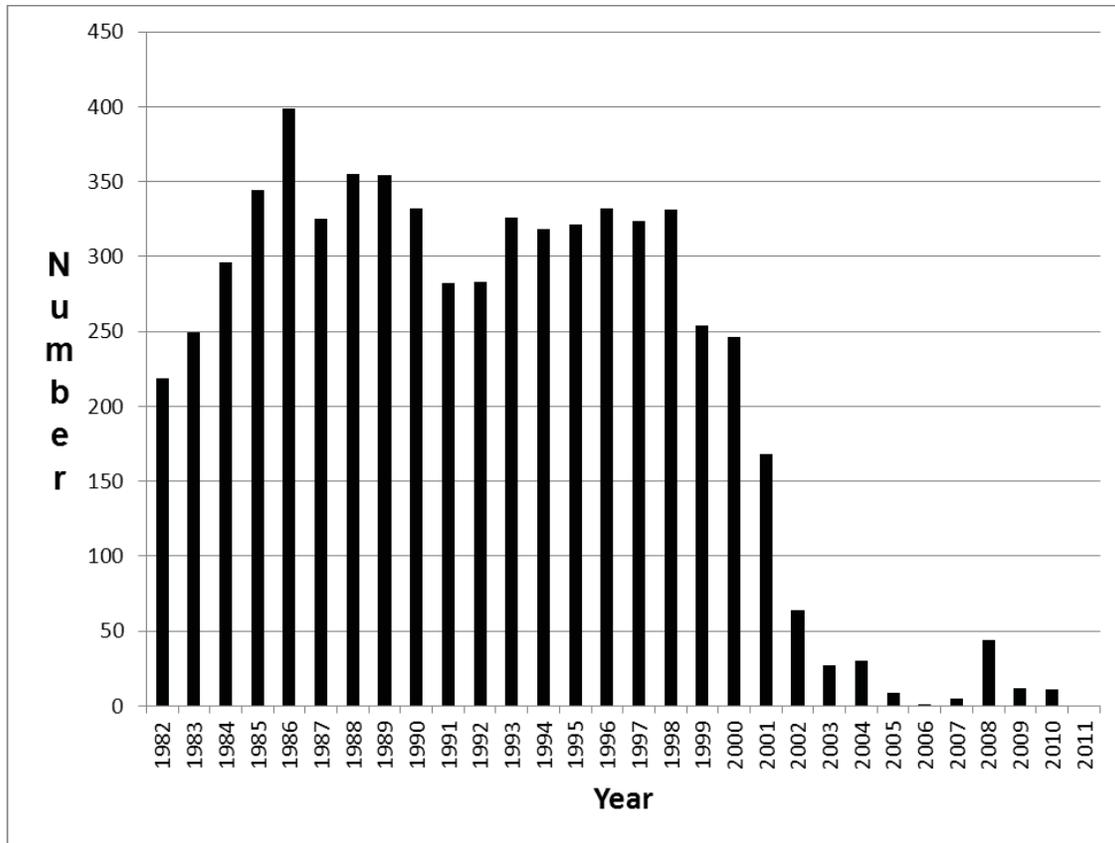


Figure 1. Number of muskoxen in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Unit 26C, observed during annual pre-calving censuses, 1982 – 2011 (Reynolds 2011).

muskoxen to 300 animals by reducing brown bear predation on muskoxen in Unit 26B. The Alaska Board of Game approved a predator control program to reduce brown bear numbers in Unit 26B at its January 2012 meeting. Once the population objective for muskoxen is achieved and the population is considered to be growing, the objective will be to maintain a harvest rate of 1-3% per year of the spring population in eastern Unit 26A and Unit 26B while the population in eastern Unit 26A, Unit 26B and Unit 26C is less than 650 animals (Lenart 2011).

The decline of muskoxen was likely caused by low calf survival in some years, increased adult mortality, and changes in distribution of the population. Weather, predation and quality and quantity of winter forage, as well as exposure to parasites and disease are all factors affecting calf recruitment, animal survival and population distribution (Reynolds 2011).

Harvest History

Legal hunting of muskox began in 1982. The average number of muskoxen harvested in Unit 26C, Arctic Refuge, increased until 1997, but then declined between 1997 and 2001 from a high of 15 in 1996/97 to a low of 2 in 2001/02 (**Table 1**) (FWS 2012, Reynolds 2011).

Federal subsistence regulations state that the number of permits issued to residents of Kaktovik for muskox will not exceed 3% of the numbers of animals observed in pre-calving surveys of Unit 26C. At least 36 animals need to be seen during precalving surveys to have 1 permit issued. In Unit 26C, no

Table 1. History of muskox harvest in Unit 26C by agency (FWS 2012).

Regulatory Year	Managing Agency	Permits Issued	# Bulls Harvested	# Cows Harvested	Total Harvested
1982/83	ADF&G	5	4		4
1983/84	ADF&G	5	5		5
1984/85	ADF&G	5	4		4
1985/86	ADF&G	5	3	1	4
1986/87	ADF&G	5	5	0	5
1987/88	ADF&G	5	5	1	6
1988/89	ADF&G	10	6	3	9
1989/90	ADF&G	10	10		10
1990/91	ADF&G	11	8		8
1991/92	ADF&G	11	5		5
1992/93	USFWS	10	10		10
1993/94	USFWS	10	8		8
1994/95	USFWS	10	8		8
1995/96	USFWS	10	8	1	9
1996/97	USFWS	15	12	3	15
1997/98	USFWS	15	9	1	10
1998/99	USFWS	13B/2C	8	0	8
1999/2000	USFWS	12B/3C	8	0	8
2000/01	USFWS	12B/3C	5	1	6
2001/02	USFWS	12B/3C	2	0	2
2002/03	USFWS	2	0	0	0
2003/04	USFWS	0			
2004/05	USFWS	0			
2005/06	USFWS	0			
2006/07	USFWS	0			
2007/08	USFWS	0			
2008/09	USFWS	1	0	0	0
2009/10	USFWS	0			
2010/11	USFWS	0			
2011/12	USFWS	0			

permits to hunt muskoxen were issued by the Arctic Refuge between 2002 through 2007 and in 2009-2011. As a result of the April 2008 census count of 44 animals, and in consultation with the Muskox Working Group, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge issued a Federal permit for one bull muskox to be taken in Unit 26C for the 2008-09 season (July 15 2008 – Mar. 31 2009), but no harvest occurred (Reynolds 2008). No muskoxen were counted within Unit 26C during a pre-calving census in April 2011 and no permits were issued to Kaktovik residents for the 2011-2012 season (Reynolds 2011).

OSM PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATION:

- maintain status quo
 initiate proposal to modify or eliminate the closure
 other recommendation

Justification

Numbers of muskoxen in Unit 26C were below the 3% threshold level required to issue permits from 2002 to 2007 and only one permit was issued in 2008. Due to conservation concerns, no permits have been issued since this time. Federal public lands should remain closed, except for permit hunting by

Federally qualified subsistence users in Kaktovik per current Federal regulations, until the population increases to a more sustainable level. The status quo is necessary to continue subsistence uses under Section 804 of ANILCA and does not violate the prohibition of ANILCA Section 815(3). Maintaining the status quo is consistent with sound management principles and the conservation of healthy wildlife populations.

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